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WILL HE COME BACK?

A ONE ACT COMEDY

BY

FELIX GRENDON

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Will He Come Back?

IT is between three and five of an afternoon in the sitting room of a modern flat near Washington Square. "An untrained estheticism," is one's offhand opinion of the room, which is decorated predominantly in blue.

Near the middle of the back wall is a doorway hung with blue curtains. Two blue and gold Chinese rugs, a lady's oak desk, a comfortable sofa, and a small ornamental table with papers, a magazine, and a cigarette case on it, are the chief articles of furniture.

The desk stands at the left wall in front. Between it and the door on the same side is an etching of an American girl by Paul Helleu. Three photographs (one of a group) are on and over the mantelpiece on the right. Their mechanical gloss sends a shiver through two delicate peacock drawings by Clara Tice that hang on either side of the fireplace.

CHARACTERS.

GILBERT SLOANE: *At the desk sits Gilbert Sloane, a handsome red-blood of 30, versed in the ways and dress of the clubman's world, and yet disposed to take the clubman's absorption in tremendous trifles lightly. A banker by inheritance and a*

dilettante by choice, he hides a deep dislike of ideas under an acquired tolerance that passes for liberalism.

A taste for works of art is one of the refinements of his strong sensuous proclivities. Being no fool, he appreciates good craftsmanship, too, and goes in for pictures, statues, vases, women, curtains, and rugs—all of a fairly high grade. He is well able to gratify this artistic bent in all its directions, for he has plenty of money, and women find his robust physique and fastidious habits an irresistible combination.

EDITH WEBBER: *The young lady who enters is fair-haired and fair-skinned, and is clothed in a Russian blouse dress of dark chiffon velvet. Her blue fox furs and large black hat would catch the eye of any man, if her figure, hair, and complexion were not beforehand. Her hair, so done up as to simulate a Castle cut, makes her look, offhand, like 18 instead of 26. But she is a thing of nerves and tensions, with an effect of being constantly on edge, and her first incisive tones betray her maturer age.*

MARTHA MCCUTCHEON: *Miss Martha McCutcheon is in the prime of her physical and at the beginning of her mental and moral development. Her dark eyes and dark hair match a costume which, though sober, is not severe. In repose, her features are plain. But interest or enthusiasm transfigure her*

face, besides releasing a vital energy that would strike fire in a stone. This, by the way, is easier than striking fire in a human being, as Martha, in the varied careers of wife, mother, and business woman, has learnt to her cost. And so, having plenty of sense, humanity, and good-humor, she is habitually unexpectant and self-contained.

* * *

(*Gilbert kisses a love-note he has written, then reads it again. The door opens. He hastily folds the note and puts it in his pocket. Edith enters in a towering rage.*)

EDITH: At it again?

GILBERT: (*With injured innocence*) What do you mean, Edith?

EDITH: Give me that note!

GILBERT: (*Instinctively protecting his pocket*) What note?

EDITH: You know perfectly well, Gilbert. You've just put it in your pocket.

GILBERT: Really, my dear, I—

EDITH: Don't shilly shally. I want to see that note.

GILBERT: (*Retreating*) Edith, there isn't the slightest ground for this unworthy suspicion—

EDITH: What's the use of lying? Caught you slobbering over it. Unless I'm much mistaken, it's another appointment with Jessie Dean.

GILBERT: Oh, well, since you know all about it—

EDITH: I don't know *all.* That's why I insist on seeing the note. (*She snatches at his coat pocket in vain.*) Either you give it to me without further trifling, or we part forever. (*She waits. He fidgets nervously. She turns to go out.*)

GILBERT: One moment, Edith. I give in. I'm afraid I can't do without it.

EDITH: (*Sharply*) Without what?

GILBERT: Your galvanic temper, my dear. I don't say it's any fun to live with. But it jerks me out of the dull stagnation of everyday routine.

EDITH: Are you trying to get around me? (*Peremptorily*) The note!

GILBERT: (*Suddenly yielding*) Here it is. But remember this. If you read one syllable, my faith in your principles will be shattered forever.

EDITH: (*Fingering the letter*) What are you talking about?

GILBERT: You profess to be a radical, don't you? Your religion, you say, is the brotherhood of all men and women—

EDITH: Which doesn't mean the brotherhood of one man and all women.

GILBERT: (*Calmly ignoring the interruption*) You object to the private ownership of land and capital, and even more firmly, to the private ownership of men and women. You believe that the per-

sonal relations between two human beings should be sacred, and free from the intrusive prying of a third. How do you reconcile these beliefs with your consuming jealousy?

EDITH: (*Pitching her voice high*) My jealousy?

GILBERT: (*Lighting a cigarette for effect*) Yes, at this very minute, what wouldn't you give to mop the floor with me and Jessie Dean?

EDITH: (*Closing the letter without looking*) So it *is* Jessie Dean?

GILBERT: (*Tantalizing her*) Aren't you going to make sure?

EDITH: (*Scornfully*) You think I'm jealous of your flirtation with a simpering wax doll? You flatter yourself. Keep your note. (*She flings it down on the table. He is considerably taken aback.*)

GILBERT: Do you mean to say you're not going to read it?

EDITH: I can guess what's in it pretty well: (*Reciting*) "Darling, your cheeks are like the peach-bloom, your tresses like the dawn." These notes of yours all read alike, Gilbert. Your love may be fickle, but your moonshine is constant.

GILBERT: (*Indignantly*) I never said that to anybody but you.

EDITH: (*Laughs derisively.*)

GILBERTS (*Gloomily*) All this rumpus because I take a little excursion once in a while—

EDITH: Excursion! You call a three-day jaunt with another woman an excursion?

GILBERT: (*In triumph*) No, no. That's what your favorite author, H. G. Wells, calls it. Like him, I'm all for the sacredness and permanence of one chief union. You must have that as a basis, if you want the rich peacefulness, the large security of a home. But a little excursion, now and then, is relished by the best of men.

EDITH: Indeed. Suppose *I* were to act on that principle, and go gallivanting about with members of *your* sex?

GILBERT: Frankly, my dear, I don't think it would become you. That sort of thing never becomes Woman, lovely Woman. Still, I'm not old-fashioned. I don't stick up for the double standard of morality and all that sort of rot. I'm a natural born varietist myself. And if a woman happens to take the same line, while I shouldn't think it proper to encourage her, I wouldn't interfere.

EDITH: All the same, I notice you are very careful not to take up with any woman that isn't scrupulously monogamous.

GILBERT: (*Airily*) Oh, I won't deny that there's something fascinating about the constancy of a woman to one man.

EDITH: And I tell you there's something disgraceful about the inconstancy of a man to one woman.

GILBERT: Perhaps there is. But, hang it all, I'm not to blame for the cells of my forefathers, am I? What's bred in the bone and all that, you know. (*He goes behind her chair and pets her indulgently.*) Come now, Edith, don't I love you better than all the others put together? The proof of it being that I always come back to you—always.

EDITH: (*Pushing him away*) Oh, yes. I'm a very convenient terminal station for your excursions. But I won't be a convenience any longer. I'm through with you. (*She picks up her furs and puts on her hat.*)

GILBERT: (*Querulously*) Women are positively mad nowadays. I can't get one of them to make a decent, comfortable home for me. (*She walks away contemptuously*) Look here, Edith, don't be unreasonable—

EDITH: (*Turning back*) I'm not. I'm merely monogamous. I think that having more than one partner at a time is filthy and indecent. And I won't live with anyone who doesn't agree with me.

GILBERT: (*With caustic emphasis*) In other words you *do* believe in private ownership, despite your fine-spun theories on the freedom of love!

EDITH: (*Flaring up*) You needn't insult me by jibing at beliefs I hold sacred. Only a fool or a cad expects anyone to share what is intimately personal. Do I share a toothbrush or a bathtub with

another woman? No. Well, I won't share a *man* with another woman either.

GILBERT: You class me with your toothbrush, do you? Excellent! (*Sardonically*) Universal brotherhood carried to a logical conclusion, I suppose.

(*Edith's passionate intention of throwing a book at his head is blocked by the ringing of the telephone bell. She takes the receiver.*)

EDITH: Yes—Yes—Miss Who? Miss McCutcheon?

(*She looks suspiciously at Gilbert and repeats*) McCutcheon?

GILBERT: What! (*He runs to her side and whispers with bated breath*) Good Lord, my wife!

EDITH: (*With her hand on the mouthpiece*) Your wife! What could *she* want? (*Calling into the telephone*) Wait a moment.

GILBERT: (*Half to himself*) So she does care, after all. (*To Edith*) You'd better let me manage her, Edith.

EDITH: You! I should think not. I'll manage her myself.

GILBERT: (*Trying in vain to take the receiver*) For Heaven's sake, Edith, leave it to me. (*Swiftly*) You don't know Martha. She looks as innocent and unassuming as a stick of dynamite. But she can outwit the old Nick himself.

EDITH: Then you're the last one in the world to deal with her. (*Into the telephone*) Yes, I'm all alone. (*To Gilbert*) I'm not the least bit afraid. Anyhow, I want to see what she's like. (*Into the telephone again*) Of course, ask her to come up, please. (*She hangs up the receiver*) And you go into my study where you won't be in the way.

GILBERT: My God! You don't know what you're up against.

EDITH: (*Bristling*) Do you imply that she's cleverer than I am?

GILBERT: (*Retreating to the study*) Nothing of the sort, my dear. But you'll be at each other's hair—

EDITH: Bosh!

GILBERT: (*Trying to assert his masculinity*) An occasion like this requires the sagacity of a man—

EDITH: (*Pushing him into the study*) Go on in, do. She'll be here in a moment.

GILBERT: (*Projecting a final warning*) You'll have trouble, see if you don't. I'll be close at hand, though, to get you out of it.

(*Edith shuts the door with a bang*)

GILBERT: (*Poking his head out again*) Really Edith—

(*The door bell rings. She stamps her foot at him imperiously. With an air of resigning her to a well-merited fate, he shuts the door. Martha comes in.*

She approaches to shake hands, but Edith anticipates her.)

EDITH: (*Coldly*) Sit down, please, Miss—McCutcheon.

MARTHA: (*Looking around*) What a pretty flat. Where did you get these curtains! Beauties, I must say. (*She walks over to them, and then touches the wall*). And quite the latest thing in wall paper.

(*Edith is dumbfounded at her visitor's offhand behavior, yet she cannot conceal her pride of possession.*)

EDITH: It's a grass-cloth.

MARTHA: Stunning. Though personally, I like a flat wash better than a paper. It's so much cleaner.

EDITH: (*Outraged*) You haven't come here merely to criticise my furnishings, I presume?

MARTHA: (*Laughingly*) Forgive me for snooping around like this. I'm an interior decorator, you know. My art always gets the better of my head. Is Gilbert in?

EDITH: (*Authoritatively*) No.

MARTHA: (*With a sigh of relief*) That's good. Two women can talk so much better alone.

EDITH: (*Coldly*) Quite so.

MARTHA: (*Rattling away to keep up her courage*) A man is a most disturbing factor when women have serious business in hand. He affects

to despise us for paying him too much attention. But what happens if we forget him for the least little while? He prances furiously all over the shop until we notice him again. And so we *do* notice him. It ruins work, but it's the only way to keep him quiet.

EDITH: (*With studied moderation*) Would you mind telling me what you came about?

MARTHA: About Gilbert, of course.

EDITH: I can guess what you want.

MARTHA: (*Dubiously*) Oh, can you? That would simplify matters immensely. (*They sit down*) It's nearly a year ago now since Gilbert left me.

EDITH: Yes, I know.

MARTHA: (*Disjointedly*) And, of course, I've had my business and the two children to look after.

EDITH: (*With forced sympathy*) I can quite understand how you feel.

MARTHA: (*With real sympathy*) I dare say you can. He's the same Gilbert, that's easy to see.

EDITH: (*Politely*) I don't quite know what you mean.

MARTHA: A decorator gets used to sizing up souls as easily as interiors. If you want to catch a man's soul off guard, study the colors, arrangements, and decorations of his living room. The high lights and the low, the harmonies and the discords

—they are so many revelations, trumpet-tongued.

EDITH: What are you driving at?

MARTHA: Look at this mantelpiece. Above, a picture of Gilbert and his Sunday School classmates. On the right of that Satsuma vase a photo of his mother, on the left, a photo of—of you, I judge?

EDITH: Yes.

MARTHA: Well, the mantelpiece in my sitting room is just like this one. The same Satsuma vase, the same Sunday School picture, the same photos—except that the one on the left is a photo of me. And the same graceful Adam desk, the same voluptuous curtains, the same gay disorder in the distribution of things. In short, the same jaunty, sensuous, harum-scarum, sentimental, materialistic Gilbert.

EDITH: (*Menacingly*) Whatever his faults may be, I won't have him abused in my presence. He is my best friend.

MARTHA: (*Affecting solemnity*) He is the father of my children.

(*Edith, too angry to catch the irony of the situation, is slightly overawed by the conventional allusion.*)

EDITH: (*Defiantly*) That gives you a claim upon his purse, a claim that has, I believe, been amply recognized. But it gives you no lasting claim upon

his love. Love yields to no law save its passionate need of fulfillment.

MARTHA: (*Relieved*) Why didn't you say so before, my dear? (*She goes over to Edith*) Now that I know you love him passionately, nothing will be simpler than to straighten out this perplexing business. But you must help me.

EDITH: Help you!

MARTHA: Yes. Help me to help Gilbert; help me to save him from this wasteful life of philandering.

EDITH: (*Going up to her fiercely*) I know very well what your game is. But you are wasting your time. You can't persuade me to give him up.

MARTHA: Persuade you to give him up! My dear Miss Webber, I came here to persuade you to keep him.

EDITH: What!

MARTHA: Yes. We've misunderstood each other completely. Come, let's sit down and talk it over like friends.

(*They both sit down on the sofa.*)

EDITH: (*Suspiciously*) Why do you want me to keep him? Do you dislike him?

MARTHA: Does anyone dislike him? You know his personal charm and fascinating ways. Unfortunately, there is one way he treads too often.

EDITH: What way?

MARTHA: The way of a man with a maid.

(*Edith is shocked without quite knowing why. She tries to express the sentiment with greater propriety.*)

EDITH: You mean his weakness for excursions?

MARTHA: Exactly. Of course, he always came back.

EDITH: Just as he does with me! I understand perfectly how you must have felt. His low taste for polygamy filled you with disgust.

MARTHA: Oh, hardly that.

EDITH: (*Severely*) Do you mean to say you accepted his infidelities without a murmur?

MARTHA: (*Apologetically*) Well, his nature was different from mine.

EDITH: Bah! When a woman makes that ancient excuse for a man, she discredits her sex. What's more, she injures him more than she does herself. Just look at his actions. He's been a cad to you and a beast to me, hasn't he? Well, all this suffering is the consequence of your criminal indulgence.

MARTHA: I'm very sorry. But consider, when two people have been married a year or so, their relations become those of a brother and sister. Why, then, should I begrudge Gilbert a love affair once in a while? I could have had several myself for all he cared.

EDITH: Well, did you?

MARTHA: No, I was too busy. I had two children to look after and I was up to my ears in my business. No leisure, no love. When a man is in love with you, he runs through your time like a spendthrift through a fortune. He won't hear of what he calls a divided loyalty. And all your business must hang fire, while you remain at his beck and call. Now I dropped my business once, when I first met Gilbert. But I don't think I shall ever drop it again. Work like mine is fascinating; there is no end to its change and variety. But what is the difference between one lover and another? Like the difference between one seashore resort and another. The company changes a trifle, but the ocean is the same.

EDITH: What *was* the matter between you and Gilbert?

MARTHA: He was. When he was home, he interfered with my work a good deal; when he wasn't home, he interfered a good deal more.

EDITH: That sounds like a hopeless contradiction.

MARTHA: But it isn't. You see, he'd meet a new flame, pass into a state of exaltation, and off he'd go.

EDITH: (*Recalling her own wrongs*) He goes off still, thanks to your training.

MARTHA: Please don't heap coals of fire.

EDITH: (*Rubbing it in*) There's his latest. (*She shows her the note to Jessie Dean. Martha has seen*

too many notes of the same import to be curious about this one.)

MARTHA: (*Gesturing a refusal to read it*) I know it by heart. But what can we do about it? Gilbert is built like that. Some men and women take to sex the way others take to drink or stamp collecting. It becomes a sport or a hobby with them. I simply didn't take Gilbert's hobby too seriously, though his goings-off and comings-back were very trying, especially his comings-back.

EDITH: Then you were always glad to get rid of him?

MARTHA: Strangely enough, no. When he was away, I couldn't get him off my mind. You know what babies men are, how easily they sicken, and how wretched they get away from home. Well, I felt that I had pledged myself to look after him. My conscience kept whispering to me that perhaps my business and domestic interests had driven him away, and that he might be in the hands of some unscrupulous female, uncared for, unhappy, his health gone to rack and ruin.

EDITH: (*Condescending to so much simplicity*) Gilbert unhappy! You *are* easily taken in. Trust him to put himself in clover every time.

MARTHA: One never knows. Anyhow, see for yourself whether my anxiety was groundless. After each absence, he'd come back with a woeful story of

disillusionments and misadventures. You can imagine the details: his late partner had disclosed a bushel of faults, her features had begun to pall, and, what was worse, her conversation was trite, her jealousy unendurable, their joint bickerings endless, and so on. Romance had got another black eye. Sometimes Gilbert himself had got one.

EDITH: Serve him jolly well right, the heartless brute! Fancy forcing you to listen to accounts of his sordid infatuations!

MARTHA: He didn't force me. I listened willingly.

EDITH: What!

MARTHA: Oh, it was fun and instruction combined. You've no idea how much we learn of squalid reality from the history of a romance told by one of the principals. The whole history, inside out, from first to last. For Gilbert told me everything, everything without reserve. What else could he do? He had to pour his heart out to somebody, poor fellow. And who was half so interested in him as I was? Nobody. Besides, he often needed advice which he couldn't get from anyone but me.

EDITH: Advice from you!

MARTHA: Yes. I could tell him exactly how far a girl meant to go when she said yes, or how little she meant to withhold when she said no.

EDITH: Am I to believe that you actually encouraged him to be unfaithful?

MARTHA: Dear, no. Again and again I pointed out that philandering is bound to defeat its own purpose, that it is a game in which you always want what you can't get, and always get what you don't want.

EDITH: Why didn't you get a divorce?

MARTHA: And leave him utterly unprotected? No. With his reckless passion for making love, think of the women into whose clutches he might have fallen! My conscience balked at such base desertion. I felt that I had to hold on, until some competent woman with a firmer hand than mine should be willing to take my legal place. Only then could I resign him without a sense of shirking a responsibility I had assumed with open eyes.

EDITH: (*Uneasily*) Why do you tell me all this?

MARTHA: Because you are the first woman to whom I'm sure he can safely be confided.

EDITH: I'm not so sure of that.

MARTHA: He never stayed so long with any of the others. He's been with you a whole year.

EDITH: Yes. And already he treats me as if I *were* his wife. Goes on excursions and comes back impenitently, just as he did with you.

MARTHA: If you married him, you could change all that.

EDITH: Judging by present results, could I do better than you did?

MARTHA: You forget, I had my business.

EDITH: (*On her high horse again*) And I have my pride.

MARTHA: But you love him. No, it's useless to protest. You showed your real feelings plainly when you supposed I had come to wrench him away from you. Let's prove that women can show common sense about an affair of sex companionship. You love him; I don't. You're domestic; I'm not. You can manage men; I can't. What can I offer Gilbert? Little beyond my sympathy and my sense of obligation. What can you offer him? The three things he most needs: Love, a home, and protection.

EDITH: Protection! He's a man, not a molly-coddle.

MARTHA: He's a red-blood, and needs protection against the unhappy consequences of his philandering.

EDITH: (*Resentfully*) How do you know he's so unhappy? As far as I can see, he's having the time of his life.

MARTHA: Oh, no, you're quite mistaken. Recall with what dejection he returns from each of his adventures, Miss Webber.

EDITH: By the way, how did you learn my name —and where we lived?

MARTHA: Didn't Gilbert tell you? He ran right into me in the Pennsylvania Station yesterday.

EDITH: And blurted out everything, I suppose.

MARTHA: He made a clean breast of it. I'm afraid it's automatic with him now.

EDITH: The unspeakable cad! To betray my holiest confidences to a stranger.

MARTHA: (*Quizzically*) It was only his wife.

EDITH: (*Lashing herself into a frenzy*) The very last person a gentleman should have confided in. I see it all now. This is a put-up job. You want to get this man off your conscience. And you hope I'll be fool enough to oblige you by marrying him. You expect me to take your place, to become a sort of human phonograph receiving the records of his endless love affairs. Never. You've come to the wrong shop.

MARTHA: Don't be absurd. He may be on my conscience. But he's on your hands, isn't he? He's a solid human problem. And you can't wash that off your hands any more than I can wash it off my conscience.

EDITH: (*Defiantly*) Can't I though?

MARTHA: (*With concise determination*) No. We can't both abandon him at the same time. What would become of him? You must face that.

EDITH: (*At the top of her lungs*) I won't face anything. I won't be dictated to. I——

(*The door opens, and Gilbert enters, cigarette in hand. Has he overheard the conversation about himself? If so, he cannot have caught its drift. For he struts between the two women as a cock struts between two jealous hens, flattered, but determined to stop their bickering.*)

GILBERT: You really mustn't quarrel about me, girls. I'm not worthy of it.

EDITH: Look here——

MARTHA: But we——

GILBERT: (*Persuasively*) There, what did I tell you, Edith? I knew I'd have to interfere. Calm down now, and I'll divide myself in half to oblige you.

EDITH: Oblige us! You can multiply yourself by ten for all we care.

GILBERT: We!

MARTHA: Yes, we're both agreed—that some one must take care of you.

GILBERT: Magnificent thoughtfulness. (*With irony*) And would it be too much to ask which of you the fair savior is to be?

EDITH: (*Snappily*) Neither.

GILBERT: Then what on earth were you wrangling about me for?

MARTHA: (*Apologetically*) I was doing my best to induce Miss Webber to take care of you permanently.

EDITH: And Miss Webber was doing her best to decline the job with thanks.

GILBERT: (*The truth dawning on him*) You might both wait until you're asked. A fine pass the world has come to when two women dispose of a man behind his back.

MARTHA: What could we do? We both feel responsible for you, I legally, and Edith morally.

GILBERT: Really, Martha, you amaze me.

MARTHA: Why?

GILBERT: (*Appealing to High Heaven*) Why! Good God, she asks me why! (*Facing her*) Is this a fit place for a woman to meet her husband in, for the sole purpose of discussing their private domestic affairs?

MARTHA: What's fit for the gander is fit for the goose. Now sit down, and let's all be reasonable together.

GILBERT: Impossible.

EDITH: And worse than useless.

(*Nevertheless they follow Martha's commanding lead and take chairs.*)

MARTHA: The trouble with you, Gilbert, is that you don't appreciate a good home.

EDITH: (*Pessimistically*) No man does.

GILBERT: Oh, doesn't he? That's where you women are completely off the track. A man loves his home every bit as much as a woman, perhaps

more. To be sure, he's not always bragging about it, fussing over it, or giving parties in it. But he works for it, he even marries for it.

EDITH: If only for the pleasure of running away from it.

GILBERT: Quite so. But that's only for the joy of coming back to it.

EDITH: (*Sarcastically*) Or possibly for the fun of confessing your troubles over it to Martha.

GILBERT: (*To Martha*) What, you've actually given me away? Told her all I told you about her? (*He gestures to some one, God perhaps, to witness his wrongs.*) This comes of baring one's soul to a woman. (*Confronting Martha*) You have betrayed my confidence, violated my deepest trust, destroyed my faith in friendship. Tattle-tale, no, tattle-snake, viper! But what can one expect? Give a woman enough rope and she'll hang her best friend.

MARTHA: (*Unmoved*) You are forgiven, Gilbert. We know that your outbursts of blame mean just as little as your outbursts of praise. When things go wrong, you call me a viper. When they go right you tell me that "my cheeks are like the peach-bloom, my tresses like the dawn."

EDITH: (*Jumping up angrily*) What, he said that to you, too?

MARTHA: Hundreds of times.

EDITH: And to hundreds of women, I dare say. Blackguard, deceiver!

GILBERT: The charge of deception comes with poor grace from your lips, Edith, or from Martha's either. You both married me—

EDITH: (*Snappily*) Excuse me, I saved you from adding bigamy to your other crimes.

GILBERT: Well, you both lived with me, then, under false pretenses.

MARTHA: (*Good humoredly*) Here's news!

EDITH: (*Indignantly*) What next, I wonder!

GILBERT: My understanding with each of you was that I was to get a home, a woman to take care of it, and my personal freedom.

MARTHA: Man wants but little here below.

GILBERT: (*Savagely*) I asked no more than every man of my generation was brought up to expect.

MARTHA: Can you deny that I gave you your freedom?

GILBERT: My freedom, yes, but what about my home? You were so busy decorating the interior of other people's houses that you had no time for the interior of your own house. You cared for my peace of mind. But as for my comfort in body, you positively encouraged me to seek that outside.

MARTHA: But you always came back.

GILBERT: No thanks to you. For when I told you

of my love affairs (mostly fictitious at first), you didn't mind them a bit. You actually seemed to enjoy hearing the details. As I live, you egged me on to bring you news of more and more lively adventures. It was unwifely. It was indecent. It was downright immoral.

MARTHA: (*Blushing*) Nonsense, Gilbert, your exaggerations are perfectly monstrous.

GILBERT: Not in the least. You quite forgot that one touch of jealousy makes the whole world kin. You forgot everything a wife should remember. That was what turned our home into a mockery of its name. It ceased to be a home. It became a hotel. And not even a comfortable one at that.

EDITH: Well, surely *I* made a home for you.

GILBERT: A home? You mean a prison. Martha, at least, was satisfied with my constant spiritual presence. But you, radical though you professed to me, demanded my constant physical presence.

EDITH: (*Flaring up*) When a woman goes to the extraordinary pains of making a first-class home for a man, the least she can expect is that the man shall be in it. Those are my terms. Take them or leave them.

GILBERT: I shall leave them, thanks. I won't be a peg for one woman to hang her passion for busi-

ness on, or another woman her passion for owning a man. The cells of my forefathers rebel against so ignominious a choice.

MARTHA: Very natural of them, too, Gilbert. But don't forget we've inherited the cells of your forefathers, too.

GILBERT: What of that?

MARTHA: Only this. That our forefathers imposed on the world the type of woman that suited *them*. Well, we have inherited this imposing trait. And we are about to impose on the world a type of woman that will suit *us*.

EDITH: Yes. We've advanced a bit, you see.

GILBERT: Advanced? Look here, Edith. You pick up amorous tid-bits in Greenwich Village, attend lectures on Birth Control, keep a bachelor flat, read the Spoon River Anthology, and give your hair a Castle cut. But do you know what the women in the Oneida Community did, seventy years ago?

MARTHA: (*Eagerly*) No, do tell us.

GILBERT: (*Shocked*) I beg to be excused. But they did all these stunts and a good many more.

EDITH: Well?

GILBERT: Yet you call yourself advanced. Advanced! Lord, you've said it. You are an advanced woman of the period of President Polk, model 1847.

EDITH: If I were a man, I'd wring your neck. You, who coolly demand a wife, a home, and none of the responsibilities that go with these advantages, of what period are you?

MARTHA: (*Coming between her and Gilbert*) Of every period, age, and climate, my dear. Now do be sensible, both of you. (*She separates them.*) You two were simply made for each other.

GILBERT: Rot. You'd have to go far and search long to find a worse case of incompatibility of temper.

MARTHA: My dear Gilbert, incompatibility of temper is the basis for the happiest marriages I know of. When a husband and wife disagree tactfully, marriage becomes a life-long adventure. On the other hand, too complete a sympathy and too great a community of spirit are death to marital joy. That was the trouble with us. We were agreed on everything, including your right to occasional changes of sex companionship. What was the result of this perfect but tedious agreement? Alarums on my part, excursions on yours.

GILBERT: (*Stirred to the depths*) Don't shift the blame on me. You broke the spirit of our bond, even if I broke the letter. Why, you actually defended my conduct yourself. Wasn't it your doctrine that marriage is a pattern to which 57 varieties of people cannot be fitted? It is an immoral

doctrine, one you should never have preached.

MARTHA: You had already practised it, Gilbert. And it was much simpler to fit a doctrine to you than to fit you to a doctrine, for I couldn't very well redecorate your passions. Besides, you can't have your cake and eat it too.

GILBERT: How do you mean?

MARTHA: You want a home, I believe?

GILBERT: Decidedly.

MARTHA: Everybody does, especially men. And you don't want to be tied for life to one companion?

GILBERT: Decidedly not.

MARTHA: Nobody does, not even women. What people desire, however, is a long cry from what they can get. Your practical choice, Gilbert, is between a home if you are faithful, and a hotel if you are not.

GILBERT: (*Flippantly*) To be inconstant is not to be unfaithful.

MARTHA: I don't pretend to understand these fine distinctions. All I know is that you can't have an old-fashioned home run by a new-fangled woman. Indeed, you can hardly induce any modern woman to feed, serve, nurse, and worship a man in the good old style. And I must say I think it is extremely lucky for you that Edith is willing to make the sacrifice, even if she asks you to recog-

nize that the burning question in such a domestic arrangement is not: "What is home without a woman?" but "What is home without a man?"

GILBERT: Ah, Martha, your logic would be irresistible if you were speaking for yourself—

MARTHA: I'm speaking for all three of us—

EDITH: Oh, don't urge him, Miss McCutcheon. There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.

GILBERT: There are. (*He picks up the note to Jessie Dean, and flourishes it.*) Thanks for the reminder. A hotel is better than a prison, anyhow. Good-by, Martha.

(*He is out of the room, almost before they can stir. Martha, who has not reckoned on this climax, dashes after him—too late.*)

MARTHA: But, Gilbert—

EDITH: (*Bitterly*) Don't worry about him. He'll have the face to come back, as usual.

MARTHA: (*Anxiously*) I know. But to which one?

CURTAIN.

[The publishers append the following letter with the consent of the author, who declines to comment on it, except to say that he leaves it to the reader to judge between him and the lady.]

To the Editor of the NEW REVIEW:

DEAR SIR: A friend of mine has just sent me a copy of your April number containing the witty one act play, *Will He Come Back?* Before I had read three pages of the comedy, I had the strange sensation of meeting myself in cold print. You have no idea how it startled me. It was like viewing myself in a concave mirror, or reading my own epitaph on a tombstone. There simply was no doubt that the plot was a record of an actual experience in which I had been one of the principals. And it was only too evident that the young author (who has the entrée to my house) had converted his knowledge of this experience into the action of a play.

Now I do not object to his having done so. On the contrary, I am rather flattered at the attention. What I do object to is the fairy-tale atmosphere he has put into a picture that requires the pitiless realism of a Hogarth. Twenty years ago, the topic of sex was not considered fit for serious discussion in decent company. It was still an inexhaustible mine for the innuendoes of musical comedy, whilst talented people dismissed it as a stupendous joke or used it as a peg for daring epigrams. The men and

women of our generation have changed all this. Prudery has followed its hand-maid pruriency out of the pale of intelligent society. And inspired writers like Bernard Shaw have blazed an open way in literature for a genuinely artistic treatment of the relations between persons of opposite sex.

Who would care to double upon these tracks? Certainly no woman who grew up as I did under the malignant policy of silence. No. Women with faith in the coming freedom of women are so happy to find the subject of sex at least as earnestly considered as the subject of cards or complexion that they will resist with ferocity any attempt to mask or glorify it under a *double entendre,* an epigram, or a halo.

Pray do not suppose that I accuse your playwright of using the theme of sex as a mere anvil from which to strike dazzling sparks of wit. Whatever his lapses in this direction, it is clear that his intentions were honorable and that his purpose was at bottom serious. But what has he achieved? Fortune made him a present of a situation from which an adept could have manufactured no end of valuable ammunition for the Woman's Movement. Alas, he draws quite lame conclusions from quite sound premises, hands the spectator a problem tied up with a question mark instead of a frank solution, and reads the wildest and most distracting inventions into the characters

of his three persons. The result is that he spoils the point of the whole episode, and materially impairs the value of his contribution to the very movement I assume he wishes to help.

Let me begin my instances with his sketch of my own person and character. I modestly pass over the ingenuity with which he describes me as plain and then represents plainness in me as more fascinating than beauty in other women. (None of the men I know agree with his description, none of the women with his representation.) But you may remember that he treats me throughout the play as an ascetic, that is, as a woman who has suppressed her own sexual life and is so indifferent to her husband's, that she is anxious to be rid of him altogether. It does not matter whether you regard an ascetic as a defective or as a voluptuary, as one with a subnormal equipment of sex energy or as one who takes refuge from the passion of desire in the passion of self-denial. I protest that I belong in neither class. I am every inch a woman. And as for self-denial, I practise it sparingly, as all the restrictive virtues should be practised.

Of course, I know that some women "swear off" from sex the way some men swear off from drink when they take the pledge. And I sympathise from the bottom of my heart with women who are driven to this step by the misconduct of a brutal husband or

by the torments of frustration. Still, I cannot hold up celibacy as a desirable working principle of conduct, for it is obvious that its universal adoption would put an end to the human species. None the less, I notice that its vogue as an ideal is growing. Male authors are doing no little to stimulate this growth. Where the chaste heroine of the Nineteenth Century was painted as being "innocent" of all sex experiences, the love-defying heroine of the Twentieth Century is painted as rising superior to them. This illusion deceives many, although clandestine irregularities are on the increase, and although it is nearly as rash to assume that every unmarried woman is chaste as that every chaste man is unmarried. Celibacy, in short, bids fair to become the 1920 version of "purity," just as chastity was the 1890 version. And man, with his truly touching egotism, will soon be recommending the new purity (to the women he is himself unable to marry) precisely as his forefathers imposed chastity on the superfluous spinsters of former generations.

In behalf of modern women, therefore, I think it necessary to insist that I am not a born neuter like Betsy Trotwood, nor a born matchmaker like Lady Cicely in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion.* Both these ladies were warranted love-proof. But who will deny that Betsy was just a delightful personification of the womanly side of Dickens, being neither

more nor less of a female than Fiona McLeod? As for Lady Cicely, frankly, I don't believe in her. I think we shall have to repudiate her as a romantic illusion created by a noble writer in a fit of revulsion against the distracting bother of concupiscence. For I have yet to meet a woman who *never* was in love. On the other hand, I have known men (and I will not say that your author is one of them) who betrayed so perfect an ignorance of love's symptoms and revelations that it may well be that their first-hand experience of the emotion amounts to an airy nothing.

I hope to make clear why, in all sincerity, I cannot sponsor the Betsified picture of me in *Will He Come Back?* It is quite true that people are under the spell of a low and tedious moving-picture morality that assigns sexual love as the sole motive for a woman taking a man and sexual hatred as the sole motive for her leaving him. Yet the exact reverse is frequently the case. As many women nowadays will surrender their husbands from love as will stick to them from hatred. But even assuming that love is a part of all we do, surely it is seldom the chief part. We are slow to learn the lesson that sages from Confucius to Ruskin have tirelessly repeated, and that is that love is of man's life (and woman's too) a thing apart, since it occupies but a fragmentary portion of any healthy person's existence. My own be-

lief as to the best practise in this matter is very simple. All sensible human beings should take such love as comes their way, never deliberately pursuing it to the neglect of their own salvation or the work of the world. If the man and the woman meet the irresistible moment, let them seize it; for, as Mrs. Juno in Bernard Shaw's *Overruled* pointedly asks, how could they ever forgive themselves if they let the moment slip?

Holding these views, I cannot lay claim to the asceticism with which the author of the play seems to endow me. Indeed, I fail to see the point of this endowment. For were I really an ascetic, my attitude towards the relations between Gilbert and Edith would be hardly more illuminating than a tea-hater's attitude towards a cup of Formosa oolong. It is precisely because I am an altogether normal member of my sex that my conduct gives a clue to the changing sex morality of our time and illustrates a new way in which women are feeling and acting towards men. Before I can drive this home, I must say a few words about the character sketches of Edith and Gilbert.

Edith's father was a rich but respectable stock-broker who brought her up as a lady, that is, as a female trained in nothing but the art of pleasing and teasing men by turns. *So much she owed to her father.* When he failed in business, she commercial-

ized her one talent, her physical charm, and became a model for painters and sculptors in Greenwich Village. She had inherited a passion for respectability, but this was about as useful to an artist's model as a pair of fins to a bird. It had no currency in the studio, where the master was always ready with a tempting offer to her to exploit her sex. *So much she owed to her employers.* When the men she encountered professed friendship, their disinterestedness went just so far but no farther. Beyond their lip politeness, she found locked doors barring the way to every opportunity, and she noticed that a sex favor was the only key. *So much she owed to her men friends.* In time, she learned that her future was narrowed to a choice of becoming a rich man's darling or a poor man's slave. The fact that the second alternative was gilt-edged with a marriage certificate did not make slavery the more attractive. So she accepted the first alternative. Let father, employer, friend, or any man without guilt or complicity in the social system that devotes a whole sex to the gratification of desire, cast the first stone.

But if the author's picture of Edith is unsympathetic, what shall I say of his picture of Gilbert? It is, to put it mildly, not a picture at all, but a caricature. Nor is the reason for the distortion far to seek. Gilbert is a red-blood; the author (like most authors) is a mollycoddle. I use the latter term in no invidi-

ous sense. Red-bloods are men like Grant, Bismarck, Roosevelt; mollycoddles, men like Blake, Shelley, Emerson. When I met Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson on his recent visit to New York, he talked to me in his delightful way about this very matter. He pointed out that women choose red-bloods for their mates, for the fathers of their children, for their idols; and mollycoddles for their companions, for their spiritual comforters, for their slaves. Now no red-blood ever envies a mollycoddle, yet almost any mollycoddle will envy a red-blood. Isn't this rather strange when you compare the superficial and cursory part that the red-blood plays in a woman's life with the deep and constant part that the mollycoddle plays? Every red-blood has his day among women, it is true. But every mollycoddle passes his whole career among them. (Indeed, who but women discover, advertise, and champion him?) Yet no mollycoddle ever quite forgives the red-blood his transitory day. I do not know why this is so. And I mention the phenomenon merely by way of accounting for the gross uncharitableness of the sketch of Gilbert in the comedy.

Were Gilbert the selfish cad and frivolous trifler he is painted, could I possibly have loved him or wasted two thoughts on his domestic perplexities? I do not deny that he was a philanderer or that he looked on every attractive woman as David looked on Bathsheba. That is a side of him I neither admire nor

defend. Still, as it is only a side, it is quite as unfair to pretend it is the whole of him as it would be to pretend that bristling pugnacity is the whole of Mr. Roosevelt.

In any case, it was not Gilbert's fault that he combined the appearance of a matinee idol with the intense physical constitution of a Tom Jones, so that he was a magnet for women of all ages from 7 to 70. After he had done his morning's work in Wall Street (and he was most punctilious in the discharge of his business engagements), he had a large store of surplus energy to dispose of. Nature gave him no specific creative talent to cultivate, and so we must conclude that she intended him to use this surplus energy for fatherhood. But in our inefficient society there is actually less room for a man with a talent for fatherhood than for a woman with a talent for motherhood. They managed these things better 3,000 years ago. When a nation discovered a magnificent red-blood like Solomon, they saw to it that he provided the state with at least two hundred children. Contrast this with our utilization of Gilbert who, splendid example of manhood that he is, has only two.

What a loss to the community! Yet the playwright takes absolutely no thought of this loss, as is clear from his open sneer at Gilbert's dilletante efforts in art. What, I ask him, would he have had

the poor man do with his superabundant bodily powers? Had Gilbert followed the Biblical tradition, he might have had children by different mothers, but then the fear of Mrs. Grundy would have driven him to leave them, as Rousseau did, to the care of orphan asylums, or, as many of our idle millionaires do, to the carewornness of unmarried mothers. Not being cruel or unscrupulous, he avoided this underground dilemma. And thereby he, no less than the State, was a decided loser. In the absence of socially constructed avenues for the legitimate expression of the procreative function Nature had bestowed on him, he became that pathetic object, a dabbler in affairs of passion and an amateur in affairs of art.

All this I had in mind when, after nearly a year's separation, I met Gilbert in the Pennsylvania station. And here I am forced to say that your author depicts this meeting with rather less than his usual cleverness. Apparently he was quite overcome at the thought that I received Gilbert's tale of woe, not with the jealous venom that wives are popularly supposed to exhibit on such occasions, but with the genuine human concern that one intimate friend habitually feels for another. At all events, he reveals the situation with the air of offering the audience a stupendous surprise, from which I take it that it has never struck him before that a man is generally rescued from his sexual entanglements by some

woman (a husband almost always by his wife). I invite him to notice that this, in fact, is the corollary to the vulgar Nineteenth Century formula of "cherchez la femme," and I cheerfully make him a present of the idea for his next play.

To return to the Pennsylvania station. After unburdening himself of his plight, Gilbert went on his way, relieved but not rejoicing. As for me, I considered what was to be done for the three lives that had come unavoidably into collision. I realized that we were people of very decided individualities and of very different needs and dispositions. There was Gilbert, wasting himself in aimless liaisons because of a thwarted parental instinct; Edith, wasting herself in making a fetish of one man, because of a vicious education and a thwarted maternal instinct; and me, unwilling to waste myself in marital rapprochements, for if the management of my business and the care of my children were already too absorbing to leave time for sex and its fugitive enchantments, what time had I for its permanent disenchantments? Counting myself the luckiest of the three, I felt I ought to take the lead in extricating us all from a painful domestic tangle. And I decided that the only thing to do was for the three of us to meet and try to reach some commonsense agreement that each could accept without any loss of self-respect or too unreasonable a sacrifice of advantages desired.

People who discuss the play in my presence (never dreaming of my part in it) seem to have a curious impression of why I brought about this interview. I have heard some of them declare that I disliked Gilbert so much that I wanted to get rid of him at any price, and others, that I liked him so much that I was willing to martyr myself in the cause of undying love. I suspect that the author wobbles between these two mutually exclusive explanations. However that may be, I vehemently repudiate them both, and say with force that they not merely go wide of the bull's eye but actually hit the wrong target. Neither a desire for revenge nor a desire for martyrdom prompted me. My sole incentive was common human decency. I did for Gilbert precisely what I should have done for any friend in trouble, and that was to help him to the best of my ability.

The question of discarding him the way one discards an old hat or dress never entered my head for a moment. True, I was willing to consider almost any settlement, from getting a divorce from Gilbert to inviting him back. On the whole, I think I should have preferred the latter (with suitable provisos). But as I could hardly expect my individual preferences to sway the destinies of two other people, the only rational thing to do was, as I have already said, to bring all concerned in the problem into one room, and let them hammer out a solution together.

Accordingly, I paid an unexpected visit to Edith's flat, believing that there is nothing like a bold and sudden call, if you want all the cards put on the table. The sequel would no doubt have vindicated my plan, had not Edith unluckily been in the midst of an attack of jealousy. Even so, things turned out rather better than the end of the play implies. I confess to being much amused by the mystery of the question that tops the climax. In the real episode, there was no mystery about it. Of course Gilbert did not permanently link up his fate with a will o' the wisp like Jessie Dean. And of course he came back. But I will not deprive your readers of the pleasure of guessing to which one. Indeed, even if I wanted to tell, I could not do so without breaking inviolable confidences, besides giving friends of mine who are sure to see this letter an unmistakable clue to my identity. The point to grasp is that after Gilbert's return we all met once more and, Edith having recovered from her distemper, threshed the matter out thoroughly. We reached a settlement acceptable to us all. For a time we feared that the publication of *Will He Come Back?* would give us a disagreeable notoriety. But not a soul guessed at our connection with the plot, probably because domestic problems of the same kind arise oftener than we imagine. Finally, all three of us are still on the best of terms. And I can add without

exaggeration that as far as the particular crisis treated in the play is concerned, we may all be said to have lived happily ever afterwards.

No doubt the author will feel ill-used at my rebellious criticism. I shall not try to comfort him. Rebellion is the normal attitude of a character towards the character drawer, of a created being towards the creator. That is because the weakness of the newly born invention usually turns the inventor into a despot who cannot resist the cheap gratification of lording it over his creatures and moulding them after his own image. But the created have rights quite as definite as the creator, and when these rights are brutally trampled under foot, the retribution is sure to be swift and fearful, as the Gothic automaton taught his master Frankenstein. *Sic Semper Tyrannis.* Had there been half a chance, Becky Sharp would have taught the same lesson to Thackeray who, though he could not boast a fifth of her brains or a tenth of her imagination, yet had the presumption to judge her by his own procrustean morality. Either for Becky's reasons or others equally strong, every Galatea is in as violent a revolt against her Pygmalion as Eve was against her Jahveh. This antagonism is especially noticeable when the creator is male and the character created, female. For, even in our "advanced" days, most male authors still write under the influence of the

coarse Elizabethan conception of women so frankly summed up in *Othello*: "You (women) are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds."

Needless to say, I do not charge *my* author with subscribing to this indecent opinion. My grudge against him is that he does not make it clear that when a woman cuts a Gordian knot, she may be actuated by simple common sense, and not always by some obscure motive of sex or sexlessness. But I am not so ungrateful as to forget that he has put into my mouth the pithy words: "Our fathers imposed on the world a type of woman that suited *them*. Well, we are about to impose on the world a type of woman that will suit *us*." Indeed, does not the very letter I am writing demonstrate the truth of these words and thus testify to their prophetic force? My strongest hope is that the author will take them as seriously as I do. If he does, he may join me in striving to end the iniquitous system that allows mankind to be governed, and the relations between men and women to be fixed, through councils, courts, and legislatures in which the presence and the voice of women are not expressly secured.

Yours faithfully,
"MARTHA MCCUTCHEON."

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